



Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) distributed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) detailing proposed management actions to manage dense nesting cover (DNC) fields on Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Area 8 on February 23, 2021. The purpose of this proposed management action is to help remove old, decadent vegetation that has built up over time, help promote forb growth, and improve overall vegetative stand composition and vigor.

Description of the Proposed Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to remove old, decadent vegetation on approximately 40-60 acres of the roughly 129 acres of DNC fields on the WMA. This will be accomplished through prescriptive haying where each of the two DNC fields will have a large block, equally approximately 1/3 of the field size, hayed to remove old vegetative structure as well as the current year's growth. This will leave two larger blocks of vegetation in each DNC fields to provide adequate cover for game birds and their broods. The west DNC field, which is approximately 89 acres, will have roughly 30 acres hayed. The east field, which is approximately 40 acres, will have roughly 13 acres hayed. The haying activities will not occur until after July 1st to minimize any impacts to late nesting upland game birds and waterfowl and their young broods, while also allowing for late season regrowth of forbs and grasses with any late summer moisture events. Montana FWP does not want to hay the entire fields as they provide nesting, brood rearing, and thermal cover in their current state, but need some active vegetation management to improve the vegetative stand and habitat functions for wildlife use throughout the year. By conducting a prescriptive haying lease to remove approximately 1/3 of the vegetation it will allow FWP staff to determine the effectiveness of the vegetation management throughout the year for potential future vegetation management rotations.

Public Process and Comments

Montana FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human environment. In compliance with MEPA, an EA was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on February 23, 2021.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 20 days (through March 15, 2021). The public was notified through the following actions:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: Helena Independent Record, Phillips County News and The Glasgow Courier.
- One statewide press release;

- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.
- A cover letter for the EA with project and comment information was sent to three adjacent landowners.

One public comment was received during the comment period.

Name: Pat Howe

I am in total agreement with doing the haying, but I am absolutely against the way it is proposed. For best nesting and brood rearing cover it should be cut in blocks of area. The recommended way for doing this type of restoration is to do 1/3 of the field or your proposed amount. Start somewhere on the area, cut the amount out, and then move to the next section the next year and so on. That puts you on a rotation to always have 2 blocks of land standing and one that is cut and leaving a large enough area for best nesting conditions with the old cover and for when the new cover comes back. It is easier for you to manage that way as well.

Cutting in strips just makes predator runs through the field. Chicks need cover with open ground. The area not hayed will be predator strips during the nesting season. The chicks will likely move to the cut areas for insects creating a predator strip there when the chicks start feeding on insects. I have hunted areas done both ways and the strips were worthless and almost indistinguishable in a year. At Arod Lake, where they cut as I feel you should at Cree Crossing, they have a much better result. It is easier for them to manage on a rotation as well. They are still cutting blocks on a rotation.

I am familiar with the WMA and am very happy to see you doing work on it as it's not very good nesting and brood rearing cover now. I have run dogs through the area during sharptail season and do not put up very many pheasants in what should be a very productive area like most of the Milk River bottom is. Haying it in blocks will be a big step in the right direction to improve the nesting and brood rearing success.

Final Environmental Assessment

Based on the analysis within the EA and public and agency comments the EA was updated to include:

- A change from haying in rows throughout the DNC fields to haying in large blocks

After a final internal review, the EA was updated and will serve as the final documents pertaining to this action.

Decision

In consideration of the above facts and the public support received, it is my decision to recommend the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the proposed action to manage the DNC fields on Cree Crossing WMA through the proposed actions.



Mark Sullivan
Region Six Supervisor

Date: March 16, 2021